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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: NATIONAL DIALOGUE POSTPONED UNTIL AFTER
THE RETURN OF DRUZE LEADER JUMBLATT

¶1. (SBU) The national dialogue came to a temporary halt on March 7 following a dispute between Hizballah SYG Nasrallah and Speaker Nabih Berri on the one hand and Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, representing Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, on the other. The disagreement arose over a statement made by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt in Washington in which Jumblatt labeled Hizballah as a militia and refuted Lebanese claims to Sheba'a farms. Speaking to the participants in the session, Nasrallah said "I cannot continue the dialogue in the absence of Jumblatt," while Berri decided to postpone the dialogue until after the return of Jumblatt, despite strong opposition from Aridi. At last word, the dialogue will resume on March 13, following what Speaker Berri described as an opportunity for the dialogue participants to consult with their constituencies.

¶2. (SBU) It appears that Hassan Nasrallah used statements made by Jumblatt in Washington as a pretext to halt the current national dialogue. Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel, who is participating in the dialogue, told us March 7 that at the initial session of that day's dialogue meeting, Nasrallah said that Hizballah couldn't continue the dialogue in the absence of Walid Jumblatt. Gemayel told us Nasrallah argued that, "it does not make sense for us to continue the dialogue as long as Jumblatt is making his remarks outside the country." Nasrallah added, "we came to the table with an open mind and we are aware that in the end we will have to give concessions, but entering in a dialogue does not mean that others should impose on us what they think is right." Gemayel said that with that statement, Nasrallah walked out of the room.

¶3. (SBU) Gemayel blamed Jumblatt for stirring up problems with Hizballah and noted that participants had been able to convince Nasrallah to agree to disarm Hizballah provided that Lebanon has a strong army that could defend the country. Gemayel feared that friction with Jumblatt might bring Nasrallah to take a harder line with the other dialogue participants. Other participants also echoed similar position and blamed Jumblatt for the deadlock. MP Boutros Harb said, "Jumblatt's comments were unproductive," while MP Elie Skaff described them as "unhelpful and distractuve."

¶4. (SBU) Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi told us March 7 that Hizballah used Jumblatt's comments, which he said were not new, as a pretext to foil the national dialogue. Aridi indicated that he rejected attempts to blame Jumblatt for the cessation of the talks and said that he rejected

Speaker Berri's decision to adjourn the session until the return of Jumblatt. Aridi said that Berri agreed to a conciliatory gesture toward Jumblatt and issued a press statement indicating that talks were postponed because there was a disagreement over the issue of Sheba' and not over Jumblatt's remarks.

FELTMAN